

The Revitalisation of NATO and European Security

*Nicholas Williams

Since I have been involved directly in the Mediterranean dialogue with countries from North Africa and NATO, and since the Mediterranean is becoming quite important in arrangements for European security, which includes the input of the Western European Union, I thought you might be interested in some of the details between NATO and the countries there. And, in particular, I'd like touch upon the point that has been made by others about the difficulty of understanding.

I agree with most of the analysis that has been made at this conference about the development of the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) and many of the problems and the barriers about developing it. And though I agree with John Roper that progress towards developing an ESDI within NATO is now being made, I am aware that there is a certain lack of credibility in saying that for the simple reason that if you look back at NATO statements over the past few years, you will see that we're always 'making progress'. And so what's the difference between the progress we're making now and the progress we seemed to be making in the past? Well, all I can say is that this time round it's the truth – we are making progress.

To perhaps clarify that assessment, I thought it would be interesting to step back and look at why we were not making such progress in the early 1990s. I would say that in the early part of this decade there was a peculiar sense of mutual vulnerability between the two institutions, between NATO and the Western European Union, in the sense that as NATO (with a new strategic concept) was trying to define a new, broader role for itself, likewise the WEU was trying to define for itself, too, a new and broader role. And so each institution somehow felt that the ambitions of one would be held hostage

*Political Affairs Division, NATO

by the progress of the other. As such, much of the early relationship between NATO and the Western European Union was therefore rather bureaucratic and technical. From the NATO side, the Alliance was defining the conditions of its support for the Western European Union, often insisting on such principles as transparency and reciprocity; but, despite a sputtering start, one of the more useful elements which came out from that early relationship is the NATO-WEU Council. The two institutions have now gone from a position of not meeting at all to one where they meet regularly in the Council.

Today, I think NATO and the WEU have gone beyond those initial mostly bureaucratic and technical discussions. I once heard a Russian trying to explain the confusion and the difficulties in his country and he said, "Well, you've got to understand Russia is going through a transitional phase. We used to be in one phase - communism: Now, we're moving towards another phase - capitalism. But the intermediate phase is called alcoholism." In a way, NATO was in this sort of confused, intermediate 'alcoholic' stage in the early 1990s because it didn't know what the ultimate ambition, or the ultimate purpose, of this European Security and Defense Identity was. I think the Bosnia experience had a huge influence in the process of sobering up. In a sense, the Bosnia experience revalidated NATO in a way that few Europeans thought possible by exposing to the Europeans that there were limits that they could do, or were capable of doing, or wanted to do, without the support of the United States. I think it also demonstrated to countries, particularly to Spain and France, that NATO could be used in a way that served European interests, provided that those countries had an adequate voice in NATO. And so Bosnia's significance (it's 'sobering effect') on the whole debate has unleashed a new energy and a new process, or a new phase, in the development of the European Security and Defense Identity.

In 1996, a Berlin meeting of NATO foreign ministers decided and cleared up any ambiguity about the point that the European Security and Defense Identity would be built within NATO. I say 'ambiguity' because in the early 1990s there had been an attempt to build ESDI outside NATO, which caused much confusion about the ESDI's purposes and led suspicions to arise on behalf of the Americans about Europe's ultimate ambition. At Berlin, though, that point was finally cleared up by all sixteen countries: emphasis was made that within NATO there would be an arrangement which reflected a European military potential. And because this arrangement was being done for the first time in NATO, the understanding about ESDI has allowed some of the more difficult issue to be addressed head on.

So, at the moment, what is being discussed in NATO in preparation for the Madrid Summit and beyond? First of all one question is how do we conclude arrangements for assets and military capabilities of NATO and how can we conclude arrangements which would make these assets and capabilities available to the Western European Union,

should it be so agreed by the NATO Council. A second question concerns the debate about the new military command structure, including the elaboration of European command arrangements: that is, how it can be arranged so that within the NATO structure there will be command arrangements and capabilities which could be taken out, withdrawn from NATO and put at the service of the Western European Union.

These two discussions are fundamental. They didn't occur in the past. No such arrangements were close to being dealt with before. There was no possibility that NATO could have quickly made available anything to the Western European Union except after a long period of planning, discussion, preparation and so on. Now, however, we have the embryo, the germ of a different arrangement.

I think a third major result of the Berlin decision to build ESDI inside NATO is that it has eased a long-standing problem that Turkey has had with such a development. One of the frictional elements of the ESDI debate within NATO has been the fact that, of course, when we talk about 'Europeans', it's not clear what is meant by 'Europeans'. Though Turkey sees itself as a European country with a European vocation and a vocation of joining the European Union, within the WEU Turkey sees itself as having a second-class status. Within NATO, however, Turkey has an equal status. So, by building the European Security and Defense Identity in NATO, it's been possible to come to an arrangement which will give Turkey the possibility of full involvement in the ESDI as it's being built inside the Alliance. Here, then, real progress is being made.

Now, I'd like to look ahead slightly because, of course, as not all problems can be resolved, progress after Madrid towards building the ESDI will still be very slow. Why? Because after Madrid, NATO's primary purpose will not be to not build the European Security and Defense Identity within NATO: there are the movements towards enlargement and towards enhancing Partnership for Peace with our partners to work on. Plus, it has the relationship with Russia to put on a firm ground after the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Document next week. NATO has got a lot of things to do; ESDI will be one of them, but not the principle one.

One of the phrases that has been mentioned frequently during the conference is the idea of 'separable' but not 'separate' forces, which in the past has always been code for saying while ESDI should be done within NATO, NATO would define the boundaries and the limits of this ESDI. Now, however, NATO is allowing the emphasis to be put on the 'separable' element of that idea. At the moment, arrangements are being made which, if followed up, will actually make it possible to separate out significant military potential from the Alliance. Yet, a big question remains: Whose job is it to make these forces 'separable'?

If the Europeans are not united in themselves as to the purpose of the ESDI, if they are not willing to put in the resources or the energy to make this capability 'separable', then it seems to me very unlikely that this concept will be realized in any short time

frame. I would just remind you that the idea of NATO supporting the European Security and Defense Identity goes as far back as the London Summit of 1990. I would remark also that we've been able to make arrangements with Russia in a much shorter time frame than we've been able to agree arrangements on the ESDI, which tells you something about the relative complexity and, perhaps, priorities about this issue.

Let us now turn to the Mediterranean initiative. And let me begin with another story. I'm reminded about the tourist who is lost in Naples and suddenly found that his watch had stopped and he couldn't make it go. And he sees, by chance, in the corner of this square in Naples a watch shop, a shop full of watches and clocks – hundreds, even thousands of these things hanging in the window. He goes in and says, "Excuse me, my watch has stopped. Can you repair this watch?" And the man behind the counter says, "Sorry, we don't repair watches." And the tourist says, "Well, I need a watch. Could you sell me a watch? Can I look at some of your watches?" And the man behind the counter says, "Well, I'm sorry: We don't sell watches." And so the tourist says, "Well, what do you do? Your window is full of watches. You don't repair watches. You don't sell them. What do you do?" And the man behind the counter replies, "Well, actually, we castrate cats. What do you expect me to put in my window?"

And so it is like this in the Mediterranean dialogue which we've been having with our colleagues from Jordan and Israel and, particularly, the North African countries. They listen to what we say, but then say "Well, yes: NATO. You're a military organization. You're an organization which is defined for defense. You're a military organization. We hear what you say about security and cooperation and so on, but you are a military organization".

I should point out that we've made progress in this dialogue. Effectively what happens is that the ambassadors from these countries (who are sometimes accompanied by experts) come in and talk to the international staff in NATO. We speak to them individually and we tell them what is going on in the Alliance, and they respond by telling us what they think is going on in the Mediterranean. And though they've been very grateful for the information we've been trying to give, there is a fundamental problem. While NATO tends to spend "x" time telling them about what's going on with NATO, when the opportunity comes to say, "Now it's your turn. Tell us what's going on in the Mediterranean. How do you see the security situation?", they shuffle and sigh for minute and then they say, "Not much has been happening. We've told you all this three months ago. We live in the same geographical area and we have the same problems as we had three months go." Still and all, I think it's not been a useless dialogue in the sense that it would have been extremely strange if, of all European organizations and security organizations, NATO alone did not have a relationship with these countries. Such an absence would have reinforced the idea that somehow NATO was organizing against them. And the idea that the military organization called NATO

is possibly organized against them and is looking for a new threat to the South is quite a powerful one, politically, in these countries.

So, in this regard I think we've made progress (at least at the official level) in trying to get them to understand how NATO has changed. There is, however, another problem that now we're going to have to think about significantly, which is the one Ian Lesser mentioned before. Even though we've been making them understand that NATO poses no threat to them and that NATO has a new role and wishes to have good relations with them, there are two problematic issues which always tend to come up (in academic as well as official discussions) in relation to this dialogue.

One is proliferation of nuclear, chemical and other weapons and the means of delivery. The fact that this issue comes up almost exclusively in the context with the countries and the problems of that area tends to reinforce the view, or the suspicion, that somehow NATO, whatever it says, really sees them as a problem. And so I think we risk giving a contradictory message to these countries. Because we are raising non-proliferation in the priority of things that NATO is doing at the same time telling these countries that we want good relations with them, they wonder how can NATO say it wants good relations and cooperation while seeming to emphasize the risk of proliferation in their area. These countries want to know if they are considered as friends by NATO, as potential cooperation partners, in which case things can be done together, or if they are viewed as a risk or as a threat. And I don't think NATO has got a good answer to that, yet.

The second issue which will complicate the relationship and may undo some of the work we've done is the fact that the new command structure may well result in the appearance of more military infrastructure (to use a Russian phrase) in the south of NATO than in the north. If we've just reassured (to an extent) the Russians that NATO is not developing, and will not develop, its military infrastructure towards the East with enlargement, while at the time we appear to be reorganizing the military structure in the southern part of NATO, do we not give a signal contrary to the one that we've been trying to give – that NATO wants an open and friendly relationship with countries to the South? On the level of a military relationship, do we not risk giving a signal that we are saying one thing in our contacts but preparing others? Now let it be said that I think we're not actually doing anything in an overtly contradictory way, but we do have difficulty understanding them. And they, in turn, have great difficulty understanding us (for good reason) because of our not always seeming to speak in a consistent way.

So, finally, coming back to the issue at hand – building a European Security and Defense Identity: One other confusing aspect about the dialogues with diplomats in Brussels has to do with the following question which always seems to come up. It reads: "OK, today we are having our dialogue with NATO. Next week we are going to have it with the Western European Union. The week after that we're going to have it with

the EU as part of the Barcelona Process. Why can't we just do it all together? We diplomats understand that you all have different purposes and all that; but, where we've got small embassies, couldn't you do us a favor and just carry out all your negotiations and dialogues all in one go?"

And, of course, the answer is that we are not capable of doing it all in one go.

And so, while I think the inability to fully understand and analyze NATO is based on very good reasons and very good experience, I believe it also reminds us of the kind of diplomatic skill and patience we're going to need after Madrid if we are going to upgrade our Mediterranean dialogue.